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ATHABASCA LANDING

ALTA. N. W. T.

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My dear Mr. Trail

According to pre-arrangement, I left the "Landing" Jan. 12. to visit some of our Missions. The journey took me through the little known and entirely untraveled country lying between the Athabasca and Peace Rivers.

This may not inaptly be termed, "a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills." Considerable tracts are capable of cultivation and offer good areas for settlement.

Starting out with dogs, it takes from four to five days to reach Wapuskaw according to the state of the trail.

On leaving the Athabasca some twelve miles below the "Landing", a steep ascent leads from the depressed river-bed to the ordinary height of the land-level.

A series of "Muskegs" are crossed, the timber skirting these and the stunted growth of Jack Pine are nearly burnt out.

The direction maintained at first is mainly North with an Easterly trend. "Calling Lake" is reached about the second or third day.

This during the open season, must be a fine sheet of water; it is flanked on its North and South sides by high, well-timbered ground. Excellent white-fish may be obtained here, and there are good hay-swamps in the neighbourhood.

The name of the Lake "Kitoo Sakahigun" is derived from an Indian legend, according to which its centre is haunted by a spirit whose wail is heard at "unco" hours.

I have always crossed the Lake on days when winter has assumed its most attractive aspect; on bright sunny afternoons when the wide expanse of dazzling snow, framed by the dark woods and backed by the lighter setting of a range of hills to the North, reflects in myriad prisms the brightness over-head, or softens under the golden tints of the setting sun, or takes a colder hue as the light, fleecy clouds grow grey and the stars shine out in the deep, clear blue of a Northern night. Amid such scenes and under the bracing influence of the keen air, the pleasant jingle of the sleigh-bells and the shouts of the drivers, there is little room for weird and gruesome fancies.

It may be that, under a lowering sky, in the gathering gloom of a wild night, when the cloud-rack is flying, the wind is sighing among the Pines and the breaking of the waves echoes drearily along the lonely shore, that the poor heathenish imagination, beset by undefined terrors, easily conjures up dim shapes driving onward amid the mist and storm and hears far out on the wind-lashed

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waters of the Lake, the cry of some troubled spirit.

We spent a short time in visiting the few Indian families who occupy the Northern boundary of the Lake. In consequence of the sad events of last winter, the "Wetigoo" terror still lingers among them. I entered one of their miserable log shanties, here I found about ten people, men women and children, some squatted on the floor, some seated on the rough, wooden bed-steads.

A little light found its way through the cotton cloth covering the narrow slit that did duty as a window, this was supplemented by the flickering gleams from an open, mud fire-place. On one side of the room sat a young man about three or four and twenty years of age who was blind. To him I spoke of Jesus the "true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world", and pointing to the hope of immortality brought to us in the Gospel, I tried to comfort the poor fellow with a brighter prospect than his sad, darkened life with its squalid surroundings could offer. Presently the women brought forward a boy of about twelve years of age from one of the dim recesses of the shanty.

They made the astounding statement that he was conscious he would shortly become a "Wetigoo". Had they not been Indians and had I been without previous experience in such matters I should have laughed at the absurdity of the whole affair. But an Indian is not to be laughed or argued out of his belief in these things for he has been nurtured and brought up amid them. It is only by inculcating God's Word, that these superstitious terrors can be rooted out. The rising sun alone can dispel the darkness and the shadows.

There was an anxious look on the boy's face which served to disarm any suspicion that he was trying to deceive. He gave earnest attention while in simple language I explained to him that there is a spirit of evil and that he can enter and possess our hearts but that Jesus has overcome him, and that those who trust in this Saviour can be kept from evil. They begged me to spend the night with them, but on returning to the Indian trader's house, I found that the men and dogs had already started with the intention of camping beyond the Lake before darkness set in. I promised to visit them on my return.

Beyond "Calling Lake", less "Muskeg" exists, and higher land is traversed. Rather more than half a day's journey brings the traveller to "Stony Island

Lake"; this is a gem in the midst of vast solitudes and must on a bright breezy day in summer, be a very pretty spot. It lies near the foot of a range of hills which form the back-bone of the country and stretch from the North East of Pelican Lake far on toward the Northern ridge above Lesser Slave Lake.

Gazing at these hills the Indians will fore-cast the weather; when they stand out clear with a deep blue colouring expressed by the Indian word "waskata²-kwatinow" they say it is going to be warm. A few hours beyond the above named lake, the trail begins to ascend a shoulder of this range, where the latter is broken by one of the Pelican Lakes. Steep banks caused by intersecting Creeks break the easier gradients, The ravines are prolific in 'broken heads' not 'human'! but the abruptly curved heads of the flat sleighs.

The dogs tear down the sheer descent, fleeing from what is no longer an inert mass of some 400lbs weight hanging heavily on the traces, but has suddenly been transformed into a thing of life which in its wild down-ward career threatens to overwhelm them. On these Towatanow and Wapuskaw trains, the driver, brake's man and brake are rolled into one. At the signal 'down-brakes', the driver throws himself full length on the snow, as much as possible at right angles with the loaded sleigh. Grasping this firmly, his body serves as a brake, Happy if he escapes collision with stump or tree and avoids landing at the bottom a confused mass of man, sleigh and tangled dogs. Not minding so much to escape the peals of laughter with which his companions greet any little eccentricity in his downward career. Some of our young Missionaries who are gaining their first experience in "running the dogs" are a frequent source of merriment. But 'pluck', whether English, Scotch, or Canadian - it is one and the same - soon tells.

Both here and constantly throughout the journey, springs are encountered forcing their way up through snow and ice even in the mid winter months of January and February. Sealed up for a while when the thermometer sinks to 20 or 30 deg. below zero, but flowing again whenever it rises above zero. These afford most refreshing drinks to the traveller, for running with the dogs in the dry cold air is very provocative of thirst.

As we continue ascending we catch glimpses through the heavy timber of one of the Pelican Lakes away to the right. Large

Lines crown the summit. From numerous signs we gather that this is a favorite Indian Camping ground during the heat of summer. Berries grow among the glades and game must be fairly numerous in the surrounding valleys.

A long descent brings us toward the close of the fourth day to a creek whose even surface affords a welcome relief to the broken and rugged trail with its stumps and fallen timber. Two or three miles of quick running along its sinuous course opens out the wider expanse of "Sandy Lake", one of the larger of the group of lakes that stud the interior of the country. This and "Big Lake" to the North and West of the Wapuskaw Lakes are considered to have the best white-fish in this section of the country. Night set in while yet rounding the points and fathoming the depths of the bay at whose remotest point the houses were situated at which we were to camp. As we had commenced our travelling some two hours before day-break it was very pardonable when a stout-built young Englishman somewhat footsore, going out to his new Missionary sphere, did not relish the round trip on the Lake our Guide seemed bent on treating us to. This guide, a short sturdy Indian from Wapuskaw was an interesting study. As driver, he had a high moral standard for hauling dogs and when they fell short, it was very grievous to him. The way in which he appealed to their moral feelings ought to have sufficed, if any sense of right hauling lingered in their Canine minds. The scathing tones in which he would inform "Wapikwaryes" (White-neck) that he was "muchustim" (bad dog); or "Karkargu" (Crow) that he was "pewartim" (vile dog). Some sense of how very far short they were coming seemed to be aroused, when dropping his voice to a falsetto, in a querying tone, but with a ring of menace and possible contingencies in it, he uttered "aryewarkakinookee": a word somewhat difficult to render into English. Having reached this point, he would end up with a heart-piercing groan which seemed to rend the very cavities of his chest. Other and more convincing appeals that went straight to their feelings were of course never lacking (no dog-driver carries the whip in vain), these evoking sounds of wailing and of woe as only ^{such} an Indian hauling-dog can perfect. Colin Thunder for ^{this} ~~such~~ is his Anglicised name was apparently incapable of fatigue. Rising about 4.30. a. m. to put on fire, cook the breakfast, fasten

up the load, catch and harness the dogs, he would run from before daylight to dark, no small tax on one's power besides guiding the Cariole or loaded sleigh through the narrow intricacies of the trail or lifting the whole affair over the stems of fallen trees that often fairly barricaded the road; not to speak of the above named vocal exercises which were in constant requisition. No sooner was some suitable spot reached at dusk, than he was off into the deep snow cutting Pine-brush for the Camp and wood for the night's fire; this done, he set to work to cook supper over a roasting fire. He threw himself with equal zest into the services I held in Indian houses or tents. The night we spent at "Sandy Lake", men and women gathered in for this purpose. I had only one book in the Syllabic characters at hand. Every stool and box being occupied Colin perched himself on the table by my side (he is very proud of being able to read and start hymns) and looking over with me, took a hearty share in the proceedings listening afterwards without a yawn or one restless movement to the address which I am afraid lasted more than half an hour.

But one feels that these are opportunities which may not offer again and one longs to make known to these poor souls the way of salvation by Jesus Christ.

A portage broken by the windings of a connecting channel and a small lake leads from "Sandy Lake" to "Wapuskaw Lake"; as we emerged from the screen of woods we encountered a rising wind and falling snow (weather almost identical to that we experienced last year), this increased to a gale as we reached the wildest traverse. The heavy drift blotted out from our view the opposite shore towards which we were making our way and obliterated almost every trace of what an hour or two previously had been a well defined trail.

We reached the Mission about 4 p. m. This is in charge of the Rev C. Weaver, a former student of Wycliffe Coll. Toronto. His assistants are J. A. Bruce from St. John's Coll. Winnipeg and H. A. George, my travelling companions to this point (Mr. Bruce having driven a team of dogs and successfully piloted a heavy load). The Mission stands on the brow of a headland that faces a wide stretch, half lake, half swamp lying between the two Wapuskaw lakes. It consists of a compact square log building of two stories containing within its four walls, Indian hall, school room, study, sitting room

kitchen and good bedrooms upstairs.

Two or three acres of ground around the house have been cleared and fenced. This Mission stands in the very heart of a country difficult of access and entirely the home of the Indians.

At present, seventeen children (Indians), are boarded, clothed and instructed, who, thanks to the unwearied efforts of Mr and Mrs Weaver assisted by Miss S. Weaver, present a picture of health and contentment. Soon after my arrival, acquaintances made last year kept coming in to greet me, to hear about the journey and to listen to words of Christian counsel. I am thankful to find that some of the most reliable men with their families have rallied round our Mission. Two Sundays were spent here and points visited on both Lakes through the kindness of Sam Johnston, formerly of St. Peter's Indian Reserve on the Red River and now a fur-trader. He drove me with his own dogs and though he is a fast traveller, yet it took us a day and a half to accomplish these expeditions, hold a service at each place and return. Considering the constant claims of his own business, it was a pleasing evidence of the interest he takes in the spread of the Gospel among the Indians.

I engaged Colin as my guide on my further trip. My cariole could be no longer arranged to provide me with a seat as we had to pack our fish, bedding and provisions for more than a week on it. I had my Louchoo snow-shoes and we started about 1. p. m. Jan. 25, from Wapuskaw on the three days journey that should bring us to Trout Lake. A bright sun and a keen North Westerly wind made a snow-shoe tramp a pleasure and I went on ahead across the Lake followed by Colin and the dogs. About sunset we camped among the Pine and Cotton-wood trees on the margin of a small lake. After supper, before stretching ourselves on the Pine brush, we sang to Colin's delight, every hymn we could muster. The thermometer was some 40 deg. below zero. It is curious how outward conditions will sometimes affect one's dreams.

Amid all the shifting scenes through which I wandered in my sleep a sense of somehow being cold was always there. Then my dreams took a spring-like aspect, I seemed to hear the sound of running water and the haunting cold was banished. I awoke to find my attendant up and preparing breakfast before a roasting fire whose heat had driven the piercing cold a little back.

The meal despatched, the load made up and the dogs harnessed, we started a good two hours before daylight. A waning moon threw a cold dim light over the surface of the lake as I snow-shoed ahead, ~~By its light~~ I could barely detect the slight indications in the drift marking the trail we were following. I had the start of quite half a mile and so could realise the solitude and almost oppressive silence. No wind stirred, all was still as death.

It was with a sense of relief one marked the glimmering of dawn in the Eastern sky. For a little while the cold grew more intense, and then gradually yielded before the combined influences of the sun and a breeze from the South.

During the earlier part of the day we crossed three lakes of no great size.

Later on we reached higher ground and the eye was pleased with Park-like stretches dotted with Pine and Cypré and free from under-brush. As we ascended the woods got denser, branches heavily laden with snow bowed over the slight trail. In places they actually formed tunnels just admitting the dogs and sleigh but sometimes compelling the bipeds to crawl gingerly through on all fours in fear of a perfect avalanche of snow. Then penetrating dense thickets of scrub Jack Pine growing so close that in places it looked impossible to push between. Glints of sunshine penetrating the long drawn aisles seemed all the pleasanter because of the cold dark shade that prevailed. The tracks both of Moose and Deer were fairly numerous here.

We reached "Trout" lake the afternoon of the next day. My abode during the two days spent there was the single roomed house in which the poor crazy Indian had been killed with repeated blows of the axe the previous winter. In the corner, the most convenient spot for my bed to be arranged, grim blotches on the walls flimsily veiled by a light coat of mud wash were silent witnesses to the tragedy. One of the first to come and see me was the perpetrator of the deed, an amiable looking elderly Indian whose broad pleasant face it was difficult to associate with the cruel deed. Being requested to do so, after a long silence, the old man gave a plain unvarnished account of the affair constantly saying he did not want to do it but was urged to it by his own and the fears of those about him. The Indians are in abject terror of any one thought to be a "Wetigoo". An expression equivalent to our word

"Cannibal" but with a strong spice of demoniacal possession associated with it.

He had been in constant dread of a visit from the Mounted Police and being taken out for trial. He appeared much relieved, when I told him that no further action would be taken by the Government after the publication of its Proclamation which was posted up in the house. I warned him that the Government suffered neither White-men nor Indians to kill each other.

I told him that by Christian men crazy people were considered objects for compassion and kind treatment rather than fit subjects for the axe.

This cleared the way for talk and instruction in better things. Our guests did not leave till after ten and my host remarked that he had not seen the old man so cheerful for a long time. My host, Alex. Kennedy from the St. Peter's Reserve Red River was one of the famous brigade of boat-men summoned by Sir Garnet (afterwards Lord) Wolsley to work the boats up the Nile Cataracts during the General Gordon Relief expedition. At present he is noted as the fastest runner in the North. Some two years ago between 4. a. m. and 4. 30 p. m. he ran with ^{his} ~~two~~ dogs only stopping once from a Co's post on the Peace River to their post on Lesser Slave Lake a distance of, at least, one hundred miles. A Co's clerk taking the time when he started and he asking the time of one of their clerks on his arrival at Slave Lake. As he unhitched his dogs at the close, the leader staggered and rolled over twice from sheer fatigue. He like Johnson is engaged in the fur trade.

The next morning I hired an Indian, with his dogs to take me to a camp twenty miles distant at the other end of Trout Lake. This consists of two fine sheets of water separated from each other by a low swampy neck of land about half a mile across. Alex. accompanied me going ahead with his own dogs.

He alternated a hard run with a ride, standing on the tail-end of the flat sleigh. He made "the running". I was content to be a passenger, running only at times to promote circulation. We reached the camp, about five tents pitched among huge Pine trees. Selecting the chief man's tent we were soon squatting on the blankets before a good fire. After a talk on general subjects and a meal, while the occupants of the other tents kept dropping in; I took out my syllabic book and sang one of our hymns in Cree. I then addressed them

from portions of St. Matthew's and St. John's Gospel urging the need of a new heart to understand the things of God, and speaking of a Saviour's love.

They begged me to open a Mission among them. I told them that I would not promise what I could not perform, but that if I got the means I would do so.

We got back after dark to find that Colin had been baking bread and "feeding up" our dogs for our further trip. The Indians from immediately around came in again and it was pretty late before I got to sleep. No trail existed, as the following morning we turned our faces in a South-Westerly direction for White Fish Lake. The snow was unusually deep. An Indian

about to visit his traps agreed to go ahead and break track. After two days

hard travelling we reached "Cranberry Lake", which is long and narrow but with

apparently good high land around it, about 4. 30 p. m. One solitary shanty

of one room hardly 12 x 12 stood near the shore. As our dogs ascended the

bank, about four to five men and boys came out to shake hands. Three families

were already in occupation. How to take in three full grown men and

their belongings besides, might have presented a problem difficult of solution to

a European mind. For the Indian it was not worth a thought. A Bedstead

shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it - (a passage that is more

forcible after experience) was assigned to me and an attempt made to clear it of

its debris. Taking one lingering look at the evening sky with the rich tints

of evening deepening upon it, and with one sigh for camp fire, fragrant brush,

silent Pines and bright stars overhead I entered the low gloomy shanty.

Colin brought in my bedding. I found that for lack of more room my bed-

stead must serve for divan as well as bed. I spread out my deer-skin robe

hair downwards on what looked like the scattered contents of the bag of some

enterprising Jew in the old clothes business; making a mental calculation of when

I might not possibly get to sleep before the insect population succeeded in

turning the corner. I possessed two advantages, one that I was in the re-

motest corner from the blazing fire that roared up the mud chimney and the

other that one of the two cotton covered windows was at my bed side with at

least a suggestion of fresh air. From this vantage ground I could survey the

general arrangements. The owner of the house an elderly Indian and his

wife had a low bedstead on one side of the chimney, a son in law, his wife and child occupied the other side. A third family group had the space between my host's quarters and mine, whilst a bedstead on the other side of the door was allotted to my two travelling companions and another young fellow. The middle of the floor when not required to do duty as a table for meals served as a resting place for a long, lanky boy. The rafters were so low that one could stow things handily upon them. Sixteen fish were being thawed for the dogs on a rack over the fire. This combination added to the fact that every man and boy also two of the women smoked will give some faint idea of the density of the atmosphere. After supper I drew out my Syllabic book. I did not as yet know whether these people were heathen or Romanists; at once a general interest seemed aroused, a piece of candle was produced, Colin and two of the young fellows squatted on the ground by my side to share in the candle light and to look over C's book. I found that they knew some of our Hymns and tunes and had come in contact with our Missionaries at White Fish Lake and I spent a most pleasant and profitable time with them.

Two days quicker travelling with a better track brought us to White Fish Lake. Mr A. S. White is in temporary charge during the absence of his brother the Rev W. G. White at Lesser Slave Lake.

I was cordially welcomed by the Indians attached to this Mission and that evening and the morning of the following day were occupied by seeing and talking with those who came to see me. In the afternoon whilst visiting the houses near our Mission, we were much struck by the contrast they presented in point of cleanliness to those belonging to Indians not under Christian influence.

The following morning accompanied by A. S. White, we started for Lesser Slave Lake, a distance of 40 miles. The trail was fairly good and we reached our Mission there about two hours after dark. Twenty eight boarders are being trained here. The Rev W. G. White, who is in charge during the Rev G. Holmes furlough in England, has everything well in hand and in good order, both he and his wife taking a warm interest in the spiritual and temporal welfare of the children in school. Miss Durnal is most conscientious in the performance of her duties as matron and the children under her charge look bright

and well. It was pleasant to mark the spirit with which the Indian boys threw themselves into foot-ball giving the staff and me, in the two games in which we joined plenty to do. Most of the families attached to this Mission were away trapping and hunting, two were on their way in for the Sunday I was there, but lost some of their dogs and were unable to reach the Mission before Monday evening. I confirmed some of the older pupils on the Sunday and held a school examination during the following week showing a fair amount of progress under Mr D. Curay's painstaking care.

I had postponed spending a Sunday at White Fish Lake until my return journey. A deeply interesting incident occurred during this second visit, the sequel to which has only just come to my knowledge. Whilst visiting one of the unbaptised Indians, who had however with his wife frequently attended the services, Mr White who was with me noticed on a ledge near the chimney an idol (these are generally kept in the background); before we left he observed that it had been covered up. No remark was made at the time but this led me on the following Sunday to address them, taking for my subject the first and second commandments and associating them with the scathing utterances against idols and the gracious invitations to trust in the Lord contained in the 115 Ps.

The man was seated near me. He grew restless and yet evidently convicted; sometimes his head was buried in his hands, then he would look up and listen again. Some of the others said, "We did not come to hear these things let us go". "Nevertheless", I said, "these are true words". At the close of my address, The man evidently under conviction, spoke thus. 'They liked our words they were good, they liked us but as for these customs, they were the customs of their fathers before them and they did not want to give them up.' Of course my reply was that their and our fathers had done thus in ignorance but that they now like ourselves knew through God's Word the right way and I warned them of the danger of hearing it and not doing it.

It was with mixed feelings I left the Mission sorrowing that many still clung to their old superstitions, yet thankful for this collision, feeling sure that it would make them both think and by God's grace arouse ^{their} consciences. I have just received letters from the Rev W. G. White under date March 9. After nar-

rating a sad outbreak of supposed cannibalism and sickness that occurred at W. Fish Lake the previous week, he writes that on going there, this man of whom I have spoken as under conviction, came to him and said that he was sorry that he had been angry at my words, that they were wise words and that God had sent this sudden sickness as a punishment. He urged Mr White to hold prayers in his house. On entering the latter found the house full and held a deeply interesting service. It resulted in the baptism of this man Nahachick, his wife and three other adults. In searching out these recesses of the great Lone-Land one learns how much of idolatry, devil worship and superstition still lingers among them. The Indians are reluctant to speak about these things and it is very difficult, especially for the Missionary, to obtain information. One frequently sees near their houses or graves straight poles painted in rings after the bark has been carefully removed, with a piece of calico generally attached to them. These are regarded as in some way propitiatory and a defence against malignant spirits. Only last winter the poles and pegs of a huge medicine tent were still visible at Wapuskaw. One sometimes sees in these tents or houses a long pad of dressed Moose or Deer skin. These contain the hairs of deceased relatives. They are mingled with the hairs or feathers of the owner's powwagan or "familiar" which may be an animal or bird; whatever has presented itself to him in his dreams during the fast of his novitiate. These are carried by the owners wherever they go whether travelling or hunting. They are often highly ornamented with many coloured wools and Indian fancy work and are taken periodically to the medicine tent to receive fresh magical power.

One night while sitting with my travelling companions in a deserted house, I found what I thought, was a piece of the touch-wood (a growth on Poplar trees subject to dry rot), used by them with flint and steel. Noticing a fragrant odour about it when burning, I was told that it was not this touch-wood, but something used in the rites of the Medicine Tent, very much I expect in the same way as Incense. I could not however learn from them from what tree it was taken. Well may we long for the time when the true light may shine into their darkened hearts that these black shadows of idolatry and superstition may flee away. There is an increasing demand for the books of pra-

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vers, hymns and instructions we printed on the Mission-press here. We used large plain Syllabic characters without accents, breathings or punctuation which only serve to mystify the Indian mind. The ease with which they read them and their desire to obtain them is sufficient proof of the success of our venture and encourages us to issue the Gospels in the same characters. St. Mark's Gospel has been already set up and is on the way out to Winnipeg to be bound, as we do not possess a binding Outfit. My assistant Mr Gordon Weston is now engaged on St. John's Gospel.

May much prayer be offered for a blessing on this circulation of God's Word and for our brave and isolated missionaries that all grace and wisdom may be given them to deal with the many difficulties and to stand firm in the face of the many disappointments that beset the work among these poor fickle people.

I remain

Yours most sincerely

Richd Athabasca

I fancy I am the better man of the two! I have a sort of idea that I penned the last letter that passed between us. I think the above account in which I have sought to mingle a few humorous touches with grave matters will have an interest to you & Mrs Laill, if only to "aid long days". I am visiting the @ Mr. Simpson on the Saskatchewan for Bishop's Brother-in-law. I hope I may find the time to look in on my way thro Prince Albert.

My intention is for Mrs Young to accompany me to there & after visiting old friends for her to go on & await me in Winnipeg. I expect to be in P. A. at Toward end of July. Our united kindest remembrances to all with you.